



# U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

## Madagascar

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 228,880 square miles, and its population is approximately 17.5 million. Although precise official figures are unavailable, approximately half of the population is Christian. There are four main Christian denominations. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest denomination, followed by the Reformed Protestant Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM). President Ravalomanana was re-elected to a second term as lay vice-president of the FJKM in August 2004. The Lutheran and Anglican Churches account for most of the remainder of the country's Christians. Most other citizens follow traditional indigenous religions. Muslims constitute slightly less than 10 percent of the population, with strong concentrations in the north and the northwest. Aboriginal and ethnic Indians and Pakistanis who immigrated over the past century make up the majority of the Muslims in the country. There is a small number of Hindus among the ethnic Indians.

There are several foreign missionary groups that operate freely. These include Catholics, Protestants of various denominations including Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Several faith-based organizations, some with international affiliations, are involved in health and social services, development projects, schools, and higher education.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion. President Ravalomanana has occasionally expressed a desire to transform the country into "a Christian State"; however, there has been no attempt to establish a state religion, and most believe his comments indicate a desire to enshrine Christian principles in the day-to-day life of the country.

The law mandates that religious organizations register with the Ministry of Interior. By registering, religious organizations acquire the legal status necessary to receive direct bequests and other gifts. To qualify as a religious association, groups must consist of at least 100 members, with an elected administrative council of no more than 9 members, each of whom must be a Malagasy citizen. If the group's leadership and faithful are foreign (as is the case with the majority of the country's Muslims), they have the right to form an association "reputed to be foreign." Once the association's membership expands to 1,000 members, the administrative council may apply to be recognized as a church. The state officially recognizes 9 churches and 83 religious organizations.

Religious organizations that fail to meet the Ministry of Interior's registration requirements are free to register as simple associations. Simple associations do not have the right to receive gifts or hold religious services. Ministry of Interior officials estimate there are more than 1,000 religious organizations in the country operating without official state recognition, including

both simple associations and unregistered organizations.

The Malagasy Council of Christian Churches (FFKM) is the umbrella organization for the country's four principal Christian denominations. The FFKM is composed of the Roman Catholic, FJKM, Lutheran, and Anglican Churches, and is a key player in a broad range of issues. The FFKM is a traditional leader in education; recently its role has expanded to include coordinating a national campaign against HIV/AIDS and monitoring elections. In the political arena, the FFKM has generally served as a mediator, bringing together antagonistic factions; however, it has occasionally taken an overt position on political issues. During the 2001 presidential campaign and the ensuing political crisis, it supported Marc Ravalomanana, then mayor of Antananarivo, in his ultimately successful bid for the presidency. President Ravalomanana's position as a lay vice-president of FJKM still generates some allegations that church and state interests are not kept entirely separate. In April 2005, President Ravalomanana was criticized on these grounds following his keynote speech at a 3-day World Bank-sponsored FJKM colloquium on the role of church leaders in the country's development.

Christian holy days such as Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Assumption, All Saints' Day, and Christmas are celebrated as national holidays.

### **Restrictions on Religious Freedoms**

Numerous religious organizations operate freely in all regions of the country, often disseminating their message through public and private media. Religious organizations are granted free access to state-run media provided that their use constitutes a public service. During the month of Ramadan, for example, the national television station broadcast a daily 15-minute program that included the call to prayer. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of any religious organizations that were denied free access to state-run media.

In August 2004, the Fianarantsoa Prefecture suspended the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (EURD) for inciting public disorder by allegedly burning a copy of the Bible during a ceremony in which "Satan's materials" were burned. In September 2004, 2 pastors and 15 church members who participated in the burning were sentenced to 6 months' imprisonment.

In early January 2005, the EURD was permitted to reopen, despite a petition by several Fianarantsoa citizens to have the church closed permanently. An investigation revealed that the EURD was not officially recognized as a religious association, and Ministry officials reported that it had been permitted to form an association "reputed to be foreign" in 1998. In 2002, the EURD sought recognition as an official religious association. At the time, since the leadership consisted entirely of foreign nationals, the request was denied. The Government counseled the EURD to elect a local board and reapply, but it never filed a new application. Therefore, the EURD had technically been operating illegally for over 2 years.

On January 11 the Ministry of Justice issued an order revoking the church's status as an association "reputed to be foreign." On January 28, a second order was sent to all provincial governors and regional chiefs calling for the closure of EURD churches nationwide and the expulsion of all foreign EURD

pastors. As of March, only 11 of the 35 foreign EURD pastors had left the country. On March 17, 2005, one Ivorian and two South African EURD pastors were arrested for failure to comply with this order.

In April 2005, the mayor of Antananarivo dispatched police units to break up an EURD service being held in a private residence. The group protested, since the judicial order only called for the closure of EURD churches, not the interdiction of private practice of one's faith. After the incident, EURD faithful announced their commitment to apply for recognition as an official religious association.

The Ministry of Interior confirmed receipt of several petitions from former EURD congregations to form a new official religious organization. The Ministry stated that as long as the applications fulfilled the legal requirement of having Malagasy leadership they would likely be approved. Some of the foreign EURD pastors associated with these new applications have been permitted to remain in the country pending the outcome of their petition.

Religious services were suspended in two prisons during Easter Holy Week after several prisoners attempted to escape.

### **Forced Religious Conversions**

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Abuses by Terrorist Organizations**

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

**Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationships among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Ethnic Malagasy occasionally express resentment toward members of the predominantly Muslim Indo-Pakistani ("Karana") community. This attitude derives from the relative economic prosperity of the Karana and is not based on their religious affiliation. Some members of the Muslim community state that the President's failure to invite them to events featuring religious leaders marginalizes the community.

**Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Representatives of the Embassy regularly meet with leaders of religious communities, including minority groups. In April, an Embassy representative met with officials at the Ministry of Interior to discuss the status of the EURD. The Embassy provides materials to a small library at a major mosque in Antananarivo.

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